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## Documenta Kassel: Using Art as Their Witness

By **HOLLAND COTTER** JUNE 23, 2017



Marta Minujín's "The Parthenon of Books" on Friedrichsplatz in Kassel, Germany. Credit Gordon Welters for The New York Times

KASSEL, Germany — Given a choice between a well-ordered exhibition with a soft center, like this year's Venice Biennale, or a messy one with some hard, fibrous edges, I'll go for edges any day, which is why, despite some gripes, I had a positive experience at Documenta 14, the immense international art blowout that happens every five years in this uncharismatic industrial city north of Frankfurt.

Good doesn't mean easy. This Documenta is the first to be divided between two locations, Kassel and Athens. And the German half, I've been told by people who've seen both, is at least as hard to navigate as its Greek counterpart. In Kassel, it's installed at some two-dozen sites across town, from malls, parks and clubs to museums. It was common, during the

opening days, to run into muddled visitors wandering the streets, clutching maps and looking grumpy.

Some art travelers scorn the whole biennial/triennial/etc. phenomenon. “Festivalism” has become a common term of disparagement, and it’s not unearned. More and more of these events feel like tourist bait, like commercial art fairs with a few brains. Yet it’s thanks largely to these shows that, starting in the 1990s, the planetary scope of contemporary art, previously unknown to the Western market, including curators, finally became visible.

To a large extent, this remains true. And it’s true of this Documenta, with its roster of 160 participants made up of mostly non-marquee names, and its focus on political issues that Western Europe has recently been feeling the brunt of firsthand: racism, resurgent nationalism, metastatic capitalism and the violence fueled by all three.



Ms. Minujín’s full-scale model of the Parthenon, initially constructed in 1983 from copies of books banned by the military dictatorship in her native Argentina. Credit Gordon Welters for The New York Times

Kassel, like Athens, is an immigrant city, geographically divided by ethnicity and class. Active in weapon production during the Third Reich, it was reduced to rubble by Allied bombings. And to rev up a postwar economy, it welcomed cheap labor from Turkey, Africa and Eastern

Europe. At present, refugees from the Middle East are arriving unbidden. Over time, many transplants have settled in the Nordstadt section of town, with a major thoroughfare, the Kurt-Schumacher-Strasse, unofficially dividing that neighborhood from the city's commercial core.

Documenta 14's curators, led by the Polish-born Adam Szymczyk, have given a nod to this socioeconomic spread. In one of the city's main shopping squares, Königsplatz, they've placed a monumental sculpture by the Nigerian-born artist Olu Oguibe, a 52-foot-high concrete obelisk carved with the New Testament phrase, in Arabic, English, German and Turkish, "I was a stranger and you took me in."

A short distance away, the artist Mounira Al Solh, originally from Lebanon, has reimagined the Beirut bakery once owned by her father and lined its walls with dozens of sketches in ink, on sheets of yellow legal paper, of Middle Eastern and North African migrants she encountered in Kassel and Athens. (Like many artists in the show, she has work in both cities.)

And a little ways into Nordstadt itself, Documenta has opened one of its largest exhibition venues, the Neue Galerie. Carved out of a repurposed post office, it has high-ceilinged spaces conducive to the big-effects art that international shows like the Venice Biennale sell themselves on. But in this case, spectacle seriously disappoints. Over-scaled painting, sculpture and wall projections feel stretched thin. The smaller work, which requires more time and attention to take in, makes the stronger impression.

This includes a series of some 50 portrait photographs by the Palestinian artist Ahlam Shibli, chronicling generations of Kassel immigrants and the religious traditions they've brought with them. Similarly local in subject but harder hitting is a text-and-video installation by an activist group called the Society of Friends of Halit. It's named for Halit Yozgat, a Kassel-born Muslim of Turkish descent who died in 2006, at 21, gunned down by right-wing German terrorists in his family's Nordstadt cafe.

The Society, in collaboration with an art-school-based research team, Forensic Architecture from London, has been conducting an investigation into the role that it believes the German secret service played in the assassination. Whatever ultimate use it makes of the evidence, their project confirms that art continues to extend beyond easy categories, and can potentially change history, not just reflect it.

Art as witness is one of the show's unstated themes. Its largest work, a full-scale model of the Parthenon, initially constructed in 1983 by Marta

Minujín from copies of books banned by the military dictatorship in her native Argentina, stands outside the main Documenta buildings on Friedrichsplatz. (The piece surely packed more of a punch in its original time and place. History can also change art, trivialize it.)

With more incisive impact, at the venerable Neue Galerie, which houses a public collection of 19th- and early-20th-century art, the Berlin artist Maria Eichhorn has filled a towering bookcase with volumes confiscated from Jewish owners in World War II, and papered the walls with documents related to the notorious Gurlitt collection of Nazi-looted art.

Soon after it became known in 2013 that German authorities had failed to report a trove of stolen art they had found in the Munich apartment of Cornelius Gurlitt a year earlier, Mr. Szymczyk floated plans to display the collection in Documenta. In the end, the art didn't make it into the show, but the Gurlitts did: A painting in the Neue Galerie collection by Cornelius Gurlitt's great-grandfather, Louis, a 19th-century landscaper who traveled to Greece and took the Acropolis as a theme, is on view. It illustrates a longstanding European identification with a so-called Classical tradition, one formerly associated with aesthetic and ethnic "purity."

Several other 19th-century pictures from the Neue collection accompany this one. And it requires some effort on the viewer's part to parse the curatorial essay on art, ethnology and morality they are part of. Documenta 14 is just that kind of show. Trying to speed-read it doesn't work. In the same way, you're likely to gain little from a drive-by glance at drawings and photographs by three of India's great 20th-century artist-activists — Zainul Abedin, Chittaprosad Bhattacharya, Sunil Janah — and their documentation of the famine that ravaged Bengal in 1943-44.

That catastrophe was only partly an accident of climate. Its causes and effects both had sources in the passive-aggressive machinations of colonialism. Once you catch a hint of that reality, you begin to filter other work in the exhibition through it: terra-cotta reliefs of severed limbs by K. G. Subramanyan; and a brilliantly woven three-channel video piece called "Two Meetings and a Funeral" by Naeem Mohaiemen, about Bangladesh's lost chance, in the 1970s, to take charge of its own future.

Mr. Subramanyan, who died last year in Gujarat at 92, is a historical figure well worth knowing. There are others like Tom Seidmann-Freud (1892-1930), born Martha-Gertrud, niece of Sigmund, who changed her name early and designed enchanting books for children before taking her own life at 37.

And there's Lorenza (né Ernst Lorenz) Böttner, a transgender artist who was born in Chile in 1959, lived near Kassel, and died from complications of AIDS in New York in 1994. She lost both arms in a childhood accident, which didn't prevent her from becoming an accomplished painter, primarily of self-portraits. One is almost billboard-size. She executed it with her feet.

This Documenta offers relatively few made-for-selfie moments. An outdoor sculpture by the Iraqi-Kurdish artist Hiwa K — a kind of honeycomb-style refugee shelter — qualifies, too, though it's a video by this artist on view in the Kassel Stadtmuseum, about the Kafkaesque absurdities of trying to find shelter, that is the real must-see.

In general, film and video are the show's strength: Eva Stefani's stunning mix of politics and pornography called "Acropolis;" Terre Thaemlitz's explosive video collages on American racism; and Rosalind Nashashibi's ineffably tender documentary on the daughter-and-mother painters Vivian Suter and Elisabeth Wild, both of whom have work of their own in the show.

Many of these artists, like this Documenta as a whole, use art instrumentally, sociologically, to political ends. If you're looking for a soak in speaks-for-itself beauty, you might as well stay home.

Is that a problem? Not for me, and apparently not for them. I love that the Lahore-based Lala Rukh, for example, has turned out both eye-socking posters for the militant feminist Women's Action Forum in Pakistan, and dark, delicate abstract prints based on the sonic patterns of South Asian ragas.

With the fate of the world currently at the mercy of a few itchy fingers and unstable egos, and 65 million dispossessed wanderers looking for safe places to land, we have serious things to think about. Art, that soft, silly thing, wouldn't seem to be one of them. This scattered, uneven, relentlessly unspectacular show argues otherwise. In the end, it's as good as the time and attention you're willing to give to it.

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Documenta 14

Through Sept. 17 in Kassel, Germany, and through July 16 in Athens.

